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U.S. says it assumes MIAs are prisoners in Vietnam

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WASHINGTON — As four members of Congress left yesterday for Vietnam to investigate reports of missing U.S. servicemen, two Reagan administration officials said that while they have no proof, they assume that some Americans are still being held captive there.

Assistant Defense Secretary Richard L. Armitage and Assistant Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz said their trip to Vietnam last week produced no proof to substantiate allegations that there are living American prisoners in Vietnam.

But both men said the administration continued to assume that some Americans were being held against their will in Vietnam because it has been impossible in many cases to obtain reliable information about MIAs.

There are 2,441 Americans still listed as missing in action in Indochina as a result of the Vietnam War.

"The information that comes into our possession and continues to come into our possession makes it impossible for us to rule out that possibility," Armitage said of the administration's assumption.

Armitage said on ABC-TV's *Good Morning America* that the administration "acts under the assumption that at least some Americans are being held against their will in Indochina. . . . There may indeed be some Americans held against [their] will." He discussed the issue again at a news conference.

Armitage said Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach had said no Americans were under his government's control. Thach and other Vietnamese leaders, Armitage said, pledged to investigate reports U.S. officials have received about live Americans in Vietnam.

Ninety-five reported first-hand sightings of living Americans in Vietnam are still unresolved, according to Armitage.

He said that more than 700 additional live-sighting reports, many of them offered by refugees seeking U.S. resettlement, have either been

dismissed as fabrications or have been determined to concern Americans who returned from Indochina before communist forces took over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1975.

Wolfowitz, interviewed on NBC-TV's *Today* show, said:

"We've had over 800 reports of live Americans in Vietnam in the last 10 years. We've checked out a lot of them. . . . There are roughly 100 that we believe hold up under this best scrutiny we can put to them."

Armitage said that in addition to investigating these reports, the Vietnamese had agreed last week to investigate about 50 reports about crash sites or living Americans that the Vietnamese government has received from Vietnamese citizens.

The congressional delegation going to Vietnam is headed by Sen. Frank H. Murkowski (R., Alaska), chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. Joining him were Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D., Ariz.), Rep. Michael Bilirakis (R., Fla.) and Rep. Bob McEwen (R., Ohio). The trip also includes stops in Laos and Thailand.

After the trip, Murkowski said, his committee plans to hold hearings about the sightings of Americans in Indochina and to investigate allegations that the administration is suppressing information about them.

Murkowski said he doubted that the administration would withhold such information, but he said the hearings would give the administration's critics a public forum and give the administration a chance to respond.

In a lawsuit filed in federal court in Fayetteville, N.C. in September, two retired Army Green Berets alleged that the Reagan administration has deliberately covered up information about live POWs.

The plaintiffs, retired Maj. Mark A. Smith and Sgt. First Class Melvin C. McIntire, said that during missions to Southeast Asia they had uncovered proof that American POWs remain in Laos.

Last week, several former servicemen, intelligence analysts and a Thai businessman filed affidavits in support of the suit. The Thai businessman is a gold merchant who said he had seen 39 heavily guarded Ameri-

cans working in a gold mine in Laos.

Of the 2,441 Americans listed as missing in action in Indochina, 1,797 of them were reported missing in Vietnam, 556 are unaccounted for in Laos and the rest were in Cambodia.

Armitage said that the allegations of a coverup are "absurd" and "insulting" to the former POWs who work in the military units assigned to examine information on missing American servicemen.

At a news conference after the ABC interview, Armitage distributed a two-page rebuttal to Smith's and McIntire's allegations. The rebuttal said that they gave the government "hearsay information from sources that could not substantiate the sightings, information that simply did not relate to Americans missing or unaccounted for in Southeast Asia or information about an Army officer who died in captivity in 1961."

Meanwhile, the State Department said yesterday that it was investigating reports that an American citizen was killed or captured in Laos while privately searching for MIAs.

Department spokesman Bernard Kalb called on Americans involved in private search efforts to stop and to leave the matter to the government.

A story in the Washington Times yesterday cited U.S. and foreign sources as saying an unidentified American was captured in Laos on Dec. 17 while on a privately financed mission to either rescue or gather intelligence about MIAs. A second man was reported either killed or captured on the same date, the newspaper said.